

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 184

SO 020 271

AUTHOR Sawada, Daiyo
TITLE Aesthetics in a Post-Modern Education: The Japanese Concept of Shibusa.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (70th, San Francisco CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Education; *Aesthetic Values; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Context; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Sensory Experience
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetics; *Japan; *Shibusa

ABSTRACT

Even though the presence of Japanese products and technology has become commonplace in North America, the Japanese aesthetic has made little impact on North American society. Known as Shibusa, this aesthetic includes an openness to nature, an appreciation of the irregularities of form, a naturalness of daily life, and is seen in a great variety of forms, from the architecture of the Katsura Palace near Kyoto to an ikebana flower arrangement on a downtown Tokyo street corner. Shibusa may be described as having seven qualities: simplicity, implicitness, modesty, silence, naturalness, roughness, and normalcy. These qualities are each discussed with regard to their possible manifestations in an educational system. The Shibusa, in having no mechanical regularity or quantitative precision, invites participation by the observer because it suggests rather than commands; it opens up new possibilities because it is inherently unfinished. The principle of the unfinished can be contrasted with an opposite principle in traditional pedagogy in which anything left unfinished is seen as a weakness or a deficiency. The shibui sense of the unfinished is seen as a call to participate, an invitation to become; not a cause for reprimand. Shibui beauty is not a beauty displayed by the creator for the viewer to appreciate. Creation here means making a piece that will lead the viewer to draw beauty out of the piece for her/himself, and makes an artist of the viewer. A list of 13 references is given. (PPB)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED312184

AESTHETICS IN A POST-MODERN EDUCATION:
THE JAPANESE CONCEPT OF SHIBUSA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

Daiyo Sawada

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

DAIYO
SAWADA

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of
The American Educational Research Association

April, 1989

San Francisco

Author Address: Elementary Education, University of Alberta,
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5

AESTHETICS IN A POST-MODERN EDUCATION:

THE JAPANESE CONCEPT OF SHIBUSA

Nature manifests itself
through the medium of human beings.

Muraoka & Okamura, 1973, p. 125

Westerners are fascinated with Japan. The economic miracle that glows over the Pacific has entered our minds and homes through every possible medium: "From Sharp Minds Come Sharp Products", "Just Slightly Ahead of Our Time", "Oh, What A Feeling - Toyota". Slogans such as these beat on us day in and day out. They represent the tip of a technological iceberg, created by "Japan Incorporated," that has crossed the Pacific and melted its way into North American society. Witness the veritable flood of televisions, stereos, computers, automobiles, camcorders, copiers, pianos, sports equipment, printers, or the ubiquitous 35 mm automatic camera. Both in our communities and in our schools we are inundated with the technological productivity of Japan: We are more surprised to see "Made in USA" than we are to see "Made in Japan." Moreover, it has reached the point where we as consumers, in seeking quality, oftentimes prefer to see the latter.

In contrast, and in a silent way, there is one aspect of Japan that has had only subtle impact on our society or on our education. This is Japanese aesthetics. True, there have been aspects of Japanese aesthetics implicit in the form of some of the Japanese products marketed in North America; we are perhaps familiar with Japanese paper folding (origami), flower arrangement (ikebana), wall dividers (shoji screens), and we may own some Japanese pottery (perhaps even a Bizen pot). Nevertheless, perhaps because we are so dominated by economic concerns, it is likely that we are only vaguely aware of the sense of the aesthetic that implicitly pervades Japanese life. More particularly, we are likely completely unfamiliar with the Japanese word "shibusa" although we may be implicitly aware of some of the qualities that imbue shibusa as the highest expression of aesthetic attainment in Japan.

However, aesthetics and manufactured goods are

fundamentally different in nature: Stereos can be easily imported with little acknowledgement of the country of origin (in a manner of speaking, they have high 'generalizability'); in contrast, aesthetics runs deep in the culture of a people making it difficult to uproot or transplant (in a manner of speaking, aesthetics is specific to a way of life). In this paper I attempt to reveal the texture and tone of shibusa with the hope that we as educators and/or researchers may begin to realize an understanding of Japanese aesthetics which could have a profound and perhaps unexpected influence on the way we live, the way we learn. Such an influence may provide a perspective which is different from and counter to the "High Tech" syndrome that is so pervasive in North American society and in Japan Incorporated as well. As such, it may bring us to a post-modern realization of education in Japan and in North America founded upon a new yet very old sense of the living.

SHIBUSA

The irregularity of forms, the openness to nature, the roughness of textures, and the naturalness of daily life are all aspects of shibusa the adjectival form of which is shibui. It is seen in Japanese architecture (the Katsura Palace near Kyoto is a prime example); in Japanese folk crafts (Yanagi, 1972); in poetry and haiku painting (Zolbrod, 1982), aspects of which have trickled into our language arts programs (haiku poetry); in Japanese gardens (Itoh, 1973), very little of which have entered into school ground design; and in countless everyday aspects largely taken for granted in Japan (for example, an ikebana flower arrangement on a street corner in crowded downtown Tokyo).

The word shibusa is used by both scholars and the humblest of lay people. Yet because the concept is so unique to Japan, it is most difficult to translate into English. Indeed, even Japanese fluent in English find it all but impossible to translate shibusa. More surprising, scholars of Japanese aesthetics rarely use the word (Young, 1965). It is as if the word is so deeply ingrained in the everyday lifeworld of the Japanese it is too commonsensical for serious (scholarly) treatment. Explicating the idea may therefore be as revealing for Japanese education (which, it must be emphasized, is dissonant with shibusa in many ways) as it is for Western education. It may even help us in the West to understand the Emperor of Japan (Tenno) as a realization of Japan itself, and the tortured dualities implicit in Tenno as Man and Nation. However, this latter discussion would take us beyond the scope of the present paper.

Drawing upon the work of Yanagi (1949, 1972) and Young (1965) shibusa may be described as having seven qualities: simplicity, implicitness, modesty, silence, naturalness, roughness and normalcy.

Simplicity

Simplicity (austere, unadorned, plain, unfigured) occurs for example in the simple joy of sitting on a tatami mat after a hot relaxing bath, with a bowl of rice and some fish. Such simplicity brings a sense of deep well-being and of communion if not outright luxury. We in the West rarely access the simple joys of everyday activity that might bring an inner relaxation and peace to our day. We are too busy! Another example is the simplicity of the interior of the Japanese dwelling where the many sliding panels, if removed, effectively leave an open space defined by a roof supported by posts; this is about as close as one can come to living outdoors (with nature) while remaining inside.

In contrast, Western residences (including schools or classrooms) are often constituted of exterior walls which in their massiveness act as boundaries for separating the living (learning) space from outside (everyday) space in rather emphatic ways. There is no intent that the walls be an invitation for that which is outside to come inside nor for the inside to venture outside. Even the windows in the walls do not function in this way. Indeed, the outside is often interpreted as a distraction, and every effort is made to exclude it from classroom deliberations (children caught gazing out the window with their eyes or with their mind are likely to be sharply reprimanded).

In the same way, interior walls are often construed as barriers (impermeable boundaries) so that partitions within a school function to separate (e.g., science in the science room, music in the music room, movement in the gymnasium, studying in the library, sitting still in the classroom). A school of this kind can be interpreted as a collection of boundaries for defining spaces that separate activity; a way of celebrating the duality of inside/outside. Within this celebration, it is interesting to note that the appearance in the 1960s of open schools was anomalous; such schools came close to embodying aspects of simplicity. However, the separation mentality was so overpowering that open schools had little chance of surviving. Today, the many open schools built in North America no longer exist as such; partitions and other boundaries have been erected to define spaces which are more resonant with a compartmentalized sense of well-being, a sense of well-being that is pervasive in modern society. Need it pervade post-modern education?

Implicitness

Implicitness works together with simplicity in that in

simplicity there is always an implicit complexity that draws upon the deeper meanings that produce the simplicity. Implicit in implicitness is a wholeness which is valued in and of itself and which imbues everything which participates therein. The universe itself is an implicit whole within which everything exists and participates, including humans. From this perspective it is both unnecessary and redundant to make objects explicit by removing them from the wholeness they constitute; doing so destroys both implicitness and simplicity. Nevertheless, the Western *weltanschauung* with its reification of language (naming), draws attention to linguistic distinctions which, in defining objects, carve up nature into a complication of parts. In shibusa, such analytic complication is not seen as inherent in nature; rather it is an imposition of a mind that destroys simplicity through language. It is as if we wish to own the world through naming it, not realizing that the world that is thereby named cannot be reconstructed by integrating the names: integration in education is a desperate attempt to recapture the wholeness that was lost through naming.

In Western education, implicitness is often looked upon as weakness, as sloppiness, as imprecision. It is not surprising that, in contrast, the explicitness of precisely stated objectives (reified objectification through language) is valued and that evaluation of education in terms of these precise statements (parts) is valued even more. Within such valuation, accountability is easily reduced to the mastery of the parts with the concomitant neglect of anything that is not easily particularized. Curriculum guides, in precisely specifying the content to be covered, have through omission removed implicitness from schooling: Only the instructional objectives (parts) that have been linguistically carved out of the parent discipline are taught and tested; all else need not be covered. In attempting to cover the specified parts, teachers often produce a complicated set of disjointed parts which students find difficult to put back together in any coherent manner. We might ask whether such difficulty is inherent in the subject (e.g., mathematics) or have we artificially produced the difficulty by reducing the subject to isolated skills and procedures which, even if mastered, remain in the student's mind as isolated parts?

Yanagi (1972, p. 110) says it more poignantly:

What is the beauty that a man of erudition sees as he holds a fine pot in his hands? If he picks a wild flower to pieces, petal by petal, and counts them, and tries to put them together again, can he regain the beauty that was there? All the assembly of dead parts cannot bring life back again. It is the same with knowing.

Perhaps only in the arts has implicitness managed to survive in Western education, but even here, precision in terms

of technique and carefully worked out conditions for teaching, often overpowers implicitness (see in particular Martin, 1986).

Modesty

Modesty underscores the quiet beauty of a unpretentiousness that does not assert its presence through striking design or bright colors. The personality of the artist or teacher does not dominate; it is there implicitly in an unsaid fashion. The virtue here is understatement: If the surroundings are simple and unassertive, even a tiny flower shines through like a gem. Are children like tiny flowers that, in some classrooms, never see the light of day? In an ethnographic study, Brailsford (1985) gives a lucid even touching story of two "flowers" that could not grow in a kindergarten.

In Western education, the personality of the teacher is often dominant: The many displays and bulletin board arrangements, the detailed organization and arrangement of teaching spaces and learning experiences (perhaps in the form of a carefully structured and organized learning centre consisting of stations through which children are systematically sequenced) shout the identity and presence of the designer, the teacher. This is "Mrs. Brown's" Grade 1 class, and obviously that is "Mrs. Smith's" Grade 2 classroom. But where is Jennifer's place? Is there any space for Kim? That desk has "Brandon" written on it, but is that really space for Brandon or is it a boundary within which Brandon is kept? Who decided that Brandon would sit there? When everything is made explicit by the teacher for the child there is very little space for the child to be or to become. The tiny flower may wither away. Was it ever there? Muracka & Okamura (1973:121):

One can say that beauty is the manifestation of freedom; it is freedom that establishes the form.

Silence

Silence (tranquility, composure, sobriety, calmness) is perhaps felt most meaningfully in the quiet of the Japanese tearoom which attains a serenity of spirit through the stillness of gently boiling water and the hush of the swishing tea brush: For a moment (in our busy life) we participate in the silent eternity of the universe. Silence is the ideal of understatement; in saying nothing, everything is invited. It is an invitation to become, to bring oneself into being without clashing with another. The granting of silence in the tea ceremony is the ultimate acknowledgement of respect for the being of the other; each partakes of the freedom of mutual respect. The participants are invited to be with the eternity

of each other in the universe.

In Western classrooms, silence during a lesson is not often an invitation; usually it is an imposition of the will of the teacher upon the the space of the students. The command to be silent issues a boundary over the classroom and over each individual student which is not to be transgressed without the teacher's permission ("put up your hand" if you wish to break silence). In this sense, the command to be silent is the antithesis of an invitation. Rather than inviting students to actualize the void ("mu") through their becoming, the command is to confine each student within the bounds of silence. As a boundary to keep students within, this kind of silence is the negation of becoming, of living. It is not surprising then that, when silence is not the wish of the teacher, it is avoided like the plague. Even a few seconds of a unintentional silence seems like eternity. Teachers generally feel highly uncomfortable with unintended silence, and, as research shows, such silence is tolerated for only a matter of seconds: very soon the silence is filled with teacher speech. Paradoxically, the teacher's speech fills the silence and again the space for becoming is occupied; once more there is no space for pupil becoming. Thus, silence in classrooms is doubly negative: When it is not a boundary to separate and confine, it is quickly filled with speech that, in having no purpose other than to end the silence, is not only meaningless but occupies the space which under other circumstances could have been an invitation to become.

The broadcast industry has a special name for this kind of silence: "Dead Air". Whenever Dead Air rears its ugly head, it is quickly annihilated. The only treatment for Dead Air is death: Silence is death. If silence is death, can there be any space for becoming?

Naturalness

Naturalness expresses the spontaneity that arises in being in harmony with nature. Shibui art, for example, is not deliberately designed and produced as a product; rather, it emerges as a by-product of ongoing life. The true craftsman does not produce pottery for the sake of producing pottery but produces pottery as a by-product of ongoing relations within nature. In Japan, Raku pottery comes close to being a realization of such natural production. The concept of by-product is a most significant yet most difficult concept to appreciate when we are continually shown that the way to produce something is to know the specifications of the product and then to produce according to the specifications. The technological mind likes the explicitness of direct production (Barrett, 1979). Implicit production would be uncertain, even chaotic in

the sense of a dissipative structure (Sawada & Caley, 1985). In this sense, the penchant for behaviorally stated objectives is a prime example of unnaturalness. Objectives stated in this way are operational specifications of criteria which define the production of the desired products. Production of this kind is a linear technical task and as such is best done by machines. As Marcuse (1964) recognized more than two decades ago, the preference for direct production in education reduces living beings to the one-dimensionality of machine operation. In this context, the criteria for successful machine production are often embodied in the course of studies which some teachers follow technically (religiously?) so as not to contaminate the process of production (instruction) that leads to the realization of the precisely specified objectives. Such objectives provide teachers with reasons for everything they do. This kind of rationality can exclude naturalness (Yanagi, 1972, p. 123):

Once there were three people who took a walk in the country. They happened to see a man standing on a hill. One of them said, "I guess he is standing on a hill to search for lost cattle". "No", the second said, "I think he is trying to find a friend who has wandered off somewhere". Whereas the third said, "No, he is simply enjoying the summer breeze". As there was no definite conclusion, they went up the hill and asked him. "Are you searching for strayed cattle?" "No", he replied. "Are you looking for your friend?" "No", again. "Are you enjoying the cool breeze?" "No", yet again. "Then why are you standing on the hill?" "I am just standing", was the answer.

Roughness

Roughness, in conjunction with naturalness, indicates that the irregular textures in nature (the bark of a tree, a moss-covered stone, small pebbles embedded in clay, the jagged edges of a leaf) are beautiful in their imperfection. The reader may anticipate that an aesthetics that values naturalness and implicitness would also value roughness. In contrast, machines may produce nearly perfect pottery, but such pottery would not be shibui. It would simply be perfect in a technical sense (or nearly so) according to the criteria embodied in the specifications.

As an example, McDonald's produces "perfect hamburgers" by the billions, and for fast-food hamburgers this may be both desirable and appropriate. Schools produce "educated" (well-rounded) adults by the billions, but is such production desirable and appropriate? While in a certain sense such perfection has a beauty of its own, it is a beauty that in the commercial world is largely confined to the smooth regularity of

glass, steel, porcelain, plastic, and hamburger buns. In the educational context, it is a beauty created by the smooth regularity of basal readers, mimeographed worksheets, standardized tests, and programmed lessons. These machine-produced materials are the antithesis of nature, the opposite of roughness, the exclusion of the natural. They embody a beauty contained in a precisely specified system of production. On the contrary, as the evening sun settles over the crackling campfire, hamburgers, somewhat dirty and rough, emerge with the conversation as hikers gather around to relax in the glowing twilight of dusk. In their imperfection, such hamburgers can be very shibui. At McDonald's, they would be rejects.

In Western classrooms, roughness is largely seen as something that needs to be made smooth or well-rounded. The pebbles need to be removed from the clay or else the clay is no good for pottery. Likewise, children's everyday experiences, in their rough irregularity, are likely to clog the system. Such experiences do not meet 'input' criteria (readiness programs must first be implemented). Preference is given to the smoothly processed experiences contained in textbooks or videotapes or workbooks. Experiences directly from the child's world are too raw, too chaotic, too unmanageable; textbook problems are much smoother. However, if we remove the roughness are we not removing both the meaning and the richness of daily experience? In this connection the so called "Language Experience" (Whole Language) approach is a notable exception -- the roughness of the child's everyday experience is highlighted and enhanced in this approach to language: by welcoming her experience we bring forth the child.

In shibusa, the roughness of daily life is beautiful in its irregularity. Removing roughness removes the beauty of life. A shibui post-modern education would retain and honor such roughness.

Normalcy

Normalcy is reflected in the healthiness and endurance of everyday life. Shibui art, because it emerges from the ordinary experiences of ordinary people, has a utilitarian strength that serves daily needs. A good example is folk art created for everyday use by unknown artisans; it is rough and robust, not the work of genius. Rather, it is the work of simple honest people who toil close to nature. As such, anything too complicated, ornate, or luxurious is abnormal. The criterion of normalcy actualizes the aesthetic dimension at the level of common folk. Normalcy in education brings forth the aesthetic dimension out of the everyday studies of the everyday pupil.

In this sense, a shibui education is not exclusively

reserved for the artistically gifted, for the exceptionally creative, or for the academically talented; it is the province of students who live their education as a natural expression of daily life. This contrasts with the usual role of aesthetics in education wherein aesthetics is largely confined to school art. Having separated aesthetics from the rest of the subjects, there is no expectation that science, language arts, social studies, mathematics, or the rest of the curriculum be aesthetic in any significant way. They are subjects to be taught; they are not normal in the sense of being the realization of the aesthetic in everyday life.

In a shibui education, subjects would not be separated out for individual glorification; knowledge would constitute the everyday epistemology of the everyday experiences of the everyday student who does not leave life behind when entering school.

EPILOGUE

In a self-referential sense the present paper in its own organization has been a counter example of shibusa: In the paper, shibusa has been explicitly presented as seven qualities artificially separated from shibusa. To alleviate this countervailing character, allow me to suggest a way of bringing forth shibusa within one principle. This is the principle of the unfinished. Shibusa, in having no mechanical regularity or quantitative precision, invites participation by the observer because it suggests rather than commands; it opens up new possibilities because it is inherently unfinished. According to Okakura (1956, p. 46)

In art the importance of the same principle [the unfinished] is illustrated by the value of suggestion. In leaving something unsaid the beholder is given a chance to complete the idea and thus a great masterpiece irresistibly rivets your attention until you seem to become actually a part of it. A vacuum is there for you to enter and fill up to the full measure of your aesthetic emotion.

The principle of the unfinished can be contrasted with an opposite principle in traditional pedagogy in which anything left unfinished is seen as a weakness or a deficiency: homework not done, a lesson left hanging, or instructions not followed. In a shibui education, the unfinished is a call to participate, an invitation to become; not a cause for reprimand. It is a call for students to actualize themselves as a center within which the everyday experiences of others can find a resonance that brings forth humanity in nature. It is a call for teachers to do likewise; to listen, for in truly listening, we encourage the shibusa dwelling in others. Perhaps in a small way, this paper may be a modest beginning for educators to listen to the call of shibusa that lives and grows daily in students

everywhere. Or, as suggested by Bernard Leach in his introduction to Soetsu Yanagi's classical work (1972, p. 97):

Here, in the relationship of truth to beauty, maybe Japan makes its greatest contribution to world culture.

I give the last word to Yanagi (1972, p. 124):

It is this beauty with inner implications that is referred to as shibui. It is not a beauty displayed before the viewer by its creator; creation here means, rather, making a piece that will lead the viewer to draw beauty out of it for himself. In this sense, shibui beauty, the beauty of the Tea Ceremony, is beauty that makes an artist of the viewer.

REFERENCES

- Barrett, W. (1979). The Illusion of Technique Garden City, New York: Anchor Books.
- Brailsford, A. (1985). Early reading experiences: The literacy development of kindergarten children viewed from a cultural perspective. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.
- Itoh, T. (1973). Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden Tokyo: Weatherhill/Tankosha.
- Harada, J. (1937). A glimpse of Japanese ideals Tokyo.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). One-dimensional man Boston: Beacon Press.
- Martin, B. L. (1986). The conditions of learning for aesthetics. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.
- Muraoka, K. & Okamura K. (1973). Folk Arts and Crafts of Japan. Tokyo: Weatherhill/Heibonsha.
- Okakura, K. (1956). The Book of Tea Tokyo: Charles Tuttle Co.
- Sawada, D. & Caley, M.T. (1985). Dissipative Structures: New metaphors for becoming in education. Educational Researcher 14 (3) 13-19.
- Yanagi, S. (1949). Folk Crafts in Japan Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Yanagi, S. (1972). The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Young, D. E. (1965). The Origin and Influence of the Concept of shibusa in Japan. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Hawaii, Honolulu.
- Zolbrod, L. M. (1982) Haiku Painting. Tokyo: Kodansha International.